

Westmont College The Horizon

Voice

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Responses to student's racial (in)sensitivity

When you refer to those who are "over-sensitive" or "too thin-skinned," I highly doubt that you meant yourself or those in the majority or assimilated minorities. In fact it would be refreshing if someone were actually sensitive enough to sincerely ask some of us why we feel the way we do.

It would be a breath of fresh air if someone would directly ask me how I felt and why I feel marginalized in our society. We seem insensitive because you are not sensitive at all.

Have you ever thought that there may be a history of discrimination and persecution going back generation after generation for some of us? Have you ever asked why we seem "bitter"? Why we are angry? And have you really listened to the pain that has followed us since we were born or even before we were born?

Why have we so casually put aside the apostle Paul's words about the body of Christ, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it...." I do not recall him saying, "Don't be over-sensitive. Buck up!"

Of course, I am more than ready for civil conversation but few in the majority bring it up. And when I do, I am brushed off for being "thin-skinned" or shut down with a few choice Christian clichés.

Let's be honest, we will never get rid of rude, ignorant or insensitive remarks of a racial, ethnic, or sexual nature but can we as Christians be willing to extend compassion, listen well and seek greater empathy for others whose life experiences are different than ours?

How many of us (self included) have said, "We're supposed to be one in Christ, you

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are being divisive" as a means to shut down conversation rather than open it up? How many of us have taken initiative to read about the American experience for ethnic minorities, for multiracial people, for women, for the poor, for the disabled?

How many of us are really questioning our deeply held values, perspectives and attitudes, and also allowing others to challenge us without being defensive? How many of us have said to a roommate, a friend, a peer, "I can never understand your experience, your pain so let's not talk about it" rather than go the way of Jesus who modeled as one who asked good questions, listened with empathy and concern, and wept with those who hurt. His harshest words were for the majority.

Although I can certainly appreciate anyone's experience as a 'minority' in Russia, truth be told, you could dress like a Russian, fake an accent like a Russian (or not speak at all) and you would not be the worse for it. As Taylor Boubel said in his March 9 Letter to the Editor, his experience was for only four years. More significantly, he could leave.

In my own country, the place of my birth, I am still perceived as a foreigner. I cannot change my face. How I look and the spelling of my last name still causes people to pause and assume characteristics of me simply because of these factors.

What is unfortunate is that your experience in Russia does not have you empathize more with those who are marginalized in the United States everyday despite the fact that they are Americans, born and bred. Rather, you judge others based on your own response, which was laughing off the discrimination you felt in Russia.

It is great that you could do that but, truthfully, it is not so easy for some of us to laugh off generations of oppression with families carted off to internment camps or kept in ghettos, jobs lost due to accents or the spelling of your last name, victimized through genocide or assault, or the constant vigilance of not being pulled over or

ignored at the counter because my skin tone may be darker or eyes more slanted.

Hey, I don't feel I have a "chip on my shoulder" nor do I live like a victim. Yet I have been a victim of 'stealth' or 'soft' racism, which makes it all the harder to respond to because it is not so direct. But when I choose to speak up and to act upon my convictions that there is to be justice for all then I am again accused of being "over-sensitive" or "thin-skinned."

I will give you an example of what I hope our campus community can be. Last November I went on a date (a great date by the way) but I chose to not to have my date pick me up because of safety reasons and for past personal experiences with sexual assault and predators. When I told him that (though it was not personal) I didn't feel comfortable having a male stranger picking me up and knowing my home address, he did not accuse me of over-reacting or being too sensitive.

Instead he said, "I'm so sorry that you feel that way. I'm sorry that life is that way for you and for all women. That you as a woman have to deal with this all the time. I never have to think about stuff like that as a man."

His attitude of empathy, of genuine concern and the listening ear he offered made him more Christian than most I have encountered in the church and on this campus. And surprisingly, he was not even a Christian.

-Elena Yee, Multicultural Programs